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The virtual dimension of contemporary insurgency and counterinsurgency

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The paper looks at the virtual dimension of contemporary insurgency and counterinsurgency. It argues that the West is faltering in the 'War of Ideas' with global Jihad for the main reason that the messages that we wish to convey lack narrative coherence. This is a result of the fact that we misapprehend the nature of the virtual operational environment whereas our opponents possess an intuitive grasp of it as a result of which their structure and method of operations are better adapted and more effective than our own. There is no reason, beyond inertia, that this should remain the case.

Keywords: strategic narrative; kinetic force; narrative coherence; classic insurgency; global insurgency; cultural eschatological narrative; grand strategic perspective

The contemporary operations environment with which theatre commanders in the 'Global War on Terror' must be concerned has two dimensions: the first is the actual tactical field of battle in which bullets fly, bombs explode and blood is shed; the second is the virtual, informational realm in which belligerents contend with words and images to manufacture strategic narratives which are more compelling than those of the other side and better at structuring the responses of others to the development of events. The latter is, this author argues, essentially the dimension in which what is increasingly viewed as a 'war of ideas' with global *Jihad* is conducted. Many fear we are losing in this dimension.¹ In February 2006 in a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations then US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld acknowledged as much:

Our enemies have skillfully adapted to fighting wars in today's media age, but for the most part we, our country, our government, has not adapted. Consider that the violent extremists have established media relations committees – these are terrorists and they have media relations committees that meet and talk about strategy, not with bullets but with words. They've proven to be highly successful at manipulating the opinion elites of the world. They plan and design their headline-grabbing attacks using every means of communication to intimidate and break the collective will of free people.²

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Islamists are succeeding in the virtual dimension because the organization and method of their operations is better adapted to the Information Age than our own: our forces are unmatched in the ability to manoeuvre metal and machines to deadly effect in physical battle; the other side is proving to be better at the purposeful shaping of people's thoughts and beliefs. More specifically, this paper argues there are one overarching and three specific reasons that the West is faltering.

First, we have not adapted our war-fighting structures (which includes the whole of government not just the armed forces) to the new information-dominated operational environment.³ As a result we fight the 'war of ideas' in an ad hoc manner as though the information campaign were secondary or tertiary in importance whereas the other side treats it with resolute consistency as the main event to which everything else is subordinated. In short, we are not winning the virtual battle because we have not really put much into fighting it. For instance there is no single office for the leadership and implementation of information policy. There was one during the Cold War in the form of the United States Information Agency (USIA) but it was broken up and rolled into the State Department in 1999.

Second, we focus too much effort on trying to shift the outcome of what is essentially an intra-Muslim debate about the correct interpretation and implementation of the concept of *Jihad*. This is a vital and consequential debate but it is not one which we as outsiders can contribute to in a sophisticated and convincing way.

Third, by contrast, we do not focus enough effort on winning and maintaining the hearts and minds of the most critical and accessible population: *our own*. Clearly, armed forces do not want to be concerned with the management of domestic perceptions of conflict; nor should that be their responsibility – although soldiers of all ranks must be ever aware of the impact on the virtual battlefield of everything they do on the real one. Indeed, in the United States there is a specific legal impediment to doing so in the form of the 1948 Smith-Mundt Act (establishing the USIA) which required that propaganda intended for foreign audiences 'shall not be disseminated within the United States, its territories, or possessions'.⁴ Yet T. X. Hammes argues that the war we now face is one in which our opponent:

[Uses] all available networks – political, economic, social and military – to convince the enemy's political decision-makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit. It is rooted in the fundamental precept that superior political will, when properly employed, can defeat greater economic and military power.⁵

And if that is the case then we are ignoring the defence of a critical vulnerability. It is as though we had entered some gladiatorial combat with helmet visor closed, sword dull and bent, and shield lying in the dirt. The United States, in particular, it is argued, possesses a 'quagmire mentality' which gifts its enemies with a playbook for its defeat.⁶

Fourth, and most importantly, we struggle to be persuasive in the virtual dimension because the messages that we wish to convey lack narrative coherence. Basically, what we say does not always align with what we do. Others

have noted the enormous harm our cause is done by the evident gap between our democratic rhetoric in the virtual dimension and our tactical actions in the physical one. In the words of Sidney Blumenthal in a scathing open letter to Karen Hughes, former Undersecretary of Public Diplomacy in the State Department, ‘your position is one in which form and content (words and deeds) stand in opposition to each other’.⁷ This gap is strategically debilitating because information warriors understand that actions speak louder than words:

Successful strategic communication assumes a defensible policy, a respectable identity, a core value. In commercial marketing, the product for sale must be well-made and desirable. The strategic communication stratagem hasn’t been built that can pull a poor policy decision out of trouble.⁸

It is beyond the scope of this paper to say how to square the circle of the desire to spread democracy with the perceived need to maintain relations with friendly tyrants.⁹ The point to be made is that until that circle is squared the chances are that even the most skilfully rendered information campaign will backfire with Muslim audiences. What the paper will do, however, is outline a practical model of narrative coherence which illustrates where we have gone wrong thus far and how we might conduct information campaigns more skilfully and with less chance of backfire in future.

This paper has four parts:

Part I Propaganda 2.0, explores and disaggregates key concepts including the ‘virtual dimension’ the ‘war of ideas’, ‘strategic narratives’, ‘Web 2.0’, and propaganda, particularly in the form of ‘propaganda of the deed’.

Part II Vertical narrative coherence: ‘truthiness’, looks at the way in which the power to persuade in the virtual dimension rests largely on the ability to link narratives across a vertical spectrum from the cultural eschatological at the top to the local or individual at the bottom.

Part III The ‘theatre of operations’, looks at the three main ways in which the virtual dimension of today differs from the virtual dimension of the past.

Part IV Fight the war of ideas like a ‘real war’?, discusses how we might fight in the virtual dimension better than we have so far.

The paper concludes with a reflection on the conduct of contemporary warfare now that Marshall McLuhan’s ‘global village’ – often used as a metaphor for the Internet – would seem incontrovertibly to have arrived. In doing so it seeks to contribute to the literature concerning global insurgency, information warfare and strategic communication in general and to strategy in the ‘war of ideas’ in particular.

Part I Propaganda 2.0

Before the main analysis of this paper it is worth pausing to bring some clarity to some of the terms and concepts employed, starting with the concept of the

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‘virtual’ which is often ill-defined, or even delimited, in the literature. The sense in which the term is employed here is twofold.

First, because conflict in the ‘virtual dimension’ is a thing which is largely psychological it is used in the sense in which literary critics employ it as meaning existing in the mind and/or as a product of the imagination.

Second, because global communications, in particular the Internet, are so integral to the ‘virtual dimension’ it overlaps with (but is not exclusive to) the sense in which computer scientists employ it, meaning carried on by means of a computer or computer network. Overall, the term ‘virtual dimension’ has a certain cognate relationship with the old term ‘propaganda’ (hence the title of this subsection) to which the paper will return presently.

The term ‘war of ideas’ also needs discussing because the term is more and more frequently used but is also inadequately defined. A key point to note is that it is something of a misnomer. Another is that it is used to refer interchangeably to two separate (albeit interlinked) wars which need to be disaggregated. It is something of a misnomer because *Confrontation* of Ideas is a more apposite phrase. The distinction can be found in General Sir Rupert Smith’s recent book *The Utility of Force* where he writes ‘we are living in a world of confrontations and conflicts rather than one of war and peace’.¹⁰ What he is getting at is that we no longer fight wars as we once thought of them. Indeed, he boldly claims:

War no longer exists . . . war as cognitively known to most non-combatants, war as battle in a field between men and machinery, war as a massive deciding event in a dispute in international affairs; such war no longer exists.¹¹

What we face instead is a state of continuing hostility conducted largely by non-military means, most importantly propaganda and political agitation (which is not to say that low-level violence and the occasional eruptions of armed conflict do not also play a role). This was of course also true of the Cold War which McLuhan called a,

war of icons . . . the eroding of the collective countenance of one’s rivals. Ink and photo are supplanting soldiery and tanks. The pen daily becomes mightier than the sword . . . [The Cold War] is really an electric battle of information and of images that goes far deeper and is more obsessional than the old hot wars of industrial hardware. The ‘hot wars’ of the past used weapons that knocked off the enemy, one by one. Even ideological warfare in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries proceeded by persuading individuals to adopt new points of view, one at a time. Electric persuasion by photo and movie works, instead, by dunking entire populations in new imagery.¹²

At the beginning of this paper it was stated that our foe in the ‘war of ideas’ was global *Jihad*. This is because while it would be true to say that we are fighting with *Jihadists*, such as Al-Qa’eda and its affiliates, it is more accurate to say that we are at war with the idea of *Jihad*, the *Jihadi* mindset which must be transformed. Put differently, our big problem is not with fanatics like Osama Bin Laden and his followers (whose mindsets are probably beyond transforming by

other means than kinetic force) per se; rather it is with, to quote Sir Michael Howard,

the sympathy they enjoy within the deeply disturbed societies that have bred them. The sympathy is not so much for their objectives as for the struggle itself, the *jihad*, and for the resentment that motivates it.¹³

We will recognize that victory has been achieved in this confrontation when the idea of violent *Jihad* has become widely unpopular.¹⁴ This is why it is important to understand the two different wars which the term ‘war of ideas’ is used to describe.

The first should be understood as a global counterinsurgency against global *Jihad* which is mainly fought by and among Muslims over the future of the Islamic world and its relations with others. It exists now.

The second is the confrontation between ‘us and them’, East and West; in other words the crude division of the world described by Samuel Huntington in his 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations*.¹⁵ This second war does not yet exist despite the best efforts of Islamists to bring it on; averting it is the prize of succeeding in the first.

In short, the concept of a ‘war of ideas’ is not new but what it took a visionary of McLuhan’s stature to perceive fifty years ago is manifestly obvious today; it is truer now that the pen is mightier than the sword because we are that much further into the Information Age. Also it is in fact two wars. The first is essentially a war for Muslim minds into which we have been drawn and where we have thus far meddled in ways which for the most part have played into the hands of the extremists. The second is the more likely to come the longer we continue in this manner.

Another concept which bears dwelling on briefly is the idea of strategic narrative. On this subject there are two gurus: King’s College London Professor of War Studies Sir Lawrence Freedman and the Johns Hopkins University Professor Michael Vlahos. It is worth quoting Vlahos at length:

In war, narrative is much more than just a story. ‘Narrative’ may sound like a fancy literary word, but it is actually the foundation of all strategy, upon which all else – policy, rhetoric and action – is built. War narratives need to be identified and critically examined on their own terms, for they can illuminate the inner nature of the war itself.

War narrative does three essential things. First, it is the organizing framework for policy. Policy cannot exist without an interlocking foundation of ‘truths’ that people easily accept because they appear to be self-evident and undeniable. Second, this ‘story’ works as a framework precisely because it represents just such an existential vision. The ‘truths’ that it asserts are culturally impossible to disassemble or even criticize. Third, having presented a war logic that is beyond dispute, the narrative then serves practically as the anointed rhetorical handbook for how the war is to be argued and described.¹⁶

Freedman, more concisely, refers to strategic narratives as ‘compelling storylines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn’.¹⁷ Both emphasize two things, however, which are vital for this

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discussion because they illustrate the challenge we face as counterinsurgents on the ‘Virtual Battlefield’ and because they go a long way to explaining why our preponderance of power in the physical dimension belies a more profound anemia in the virtual one:

1. Strategic narratives do not arise spontaneously but are deliberately constructed or reinforced out of the ideas and thoughts that are already current. They express a sense of identity and belonging and communicate a sense of cause, purpose and mission.
2. Strategic narratives are not analytical and, when not grounded in evidence or experience, may rely on appeals to emotion, or on suspect metaphors and dubious historical analogies.¹⁸

Again, although he wrote long before the days of the Internet, it is helpful to look to McLuhan to understand why the above matters. We tend to think of information in warfare as inherently and obviously good. When you think about the power of weapons it clearly is. The better your information the less military hardware you need to accomplish the destruction of this or that target. But not all the war-fighting advantages of the Information Age need necessarily accrue to the more technologically sophisticated and rich. Indeed, says McLuhan:

In the new electric age of information, the backward countries enjoy some specific advantages over the highly literate and industrialized cultures. For backward countries have the habit and understanding of oral propaganda and persuasion that was eroded in industrial societies long ago.¹⁹

McLuhan describes Western society as being poised between two processes – detribalization and retribalization:

The city, itself, is traditionally a military weapon, and is a collective shield or plate armor, an extension of the castle of our very skins. Before the huddle of the city, there was the food-gathering phase of man the hunter, even as men have now in the electric age returned psychically and socially to the nomad state. Now, however, it is called information-gathering and data-processing. But it is global, and it ignores and replaces the form of the city which has, therefore, tended to become obsolete. With instant electric technology, the globe itself can never again be more than a village . . . Today we appear to be poised between two ages – one of detribalization and one of retribalization.²⁰

This is perhaps why the West struggles more to develop compelling strategic narratives: our sense of identity, belonging and cause is incoherent because we are poised between states which makes us very vulnerable for the same reason the most vulnerable state for an army on the march is halfway through a river crossing. By contrast, in his book *Globalized Islam* Oliver Roy introduces the concept of a ‘virtual Umma’ which he says:

is the perfect place for [Muslim] individuals to express themselves while claiming to belong to a community to whose enactment they contribute, rather than being passive members of it.²¹

No lack of identity or sense of cause there. Perhaps one should understand the ‘virtual Umma’ as a community which is simply further along in the process of retribalization which McLuhan describes, as a result of which it has important advantages in the creation of compelling strategic narratives that are not at first obvious to the eye.

Thinking of Freedman’s second point, we can see that there are other disadvantages we face when it comes to creating compelling strategic narratives. In the West narratives which are deliberately constructed by government are almost immediately rejected for that reason whatever their inherent accuracy or falsity. The public is highly sensitized to ‘spin’, the media excels at revealing (and counter-spinning) it, and no narrative can long survive the perception that it is based, even in part, on a lie. Narratives which reinforce already existing ideas, on the other hand, are easily portrayed as ‘populist’ demagoguery. Arguments which appeal to the reason are deemed more trustworthy than those which appeal to emotion and historical analogy, but, at the same time, generally people lack the patience for long argument. Basically, if you need to target your base and find that it is fractured and lacks purpose, lacks the attention span for in-depth appeal to argument but is exquisitely sensitive to manipulation and possesses an innate mastery of semiotics then you have a problem. And if, moreover, your opponent’s base is unified, has a sense of purpose, a rich oral tradition which lends itself well to story-listening (and telling) and is fairly credulous when it comes to conspiracy theories then you have got a very serious problem.

This brings us back to the thorny topic of propaganda. On the one hand, propaganda means nothing more than the ‘communication of ideas designed to persuade people to think and behave in a desired way’.²² On the other hand, it is a term for a wartime function that nowadays dare not speak its name. For example, in the wake of 9/11 in an attempt to get a strategic information campaign going the Pentagon created the Office of Strategic Influence (OSI) in order to influence public sentiment and policy-makers in both friendly and unfriendly countries – in other words to propagandize; its mission was described by its head, Air Force Brigadier General Simon Worden, as ‘ranging from “black” campaigns using disinformation and covert activities to “white” public affairs that rely on truthful news releases’.²³ It was abandoned after less than six months with Secretary Rumsfeld acknowledging that ‘the office has clearly been so damaged that it is pretty clear to me that it could not function effectively’.²⁴ As James Der Derian concluded of the mess:

The Infowar was on, by the Pentagon against the media – and upon disclosure of the existence of OSI, by the media against the Pentagon. The choice of title stacked the deck against the Pentagon. ‘Orwellian’ competed with ‘Kafkaesque’ as the media’s metaphor *du jour*.²⁵

On one level the OSI flopped, as Der Derian shows so well, because propaganda is a bankrupt term in our present culture: a derisory term for a suspect concept. More importantly, it failed (and deserved to fail) because traditional propaganda of this type (top-down, crude, slow, centralized and with the stamp of government

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all over it) is completely outdated. It is not very convincing with Western audiences and it is practically useless at changing the minds of rudderless Muslim youth.²⁶

The trouble is that in counterinsurgency, as is well understood, the security forces need to employ propaganda to get over the government's message to the population, to the international community, and to the voters at home. In global counterinsurgency it is the same thing only more so, particularly with respect to the last two audiences. Everyone involved in counterinsurgency must be entrepreneurial (in the sense of sensing and exploiting opportunities to make a rhetorical buck) about propaganda, be aware of the propaganda risks of all actions, and of the need to combat specific themes in insurgent propaganda in a timely manner. In particular they must be aware of the environment in which propaganda campaigns are now conducted.

A key environment in this global counterinsurgency is the Internet. In fact, in the opinion of some observers the Internet is already entering its second generation: becoming 'Web 2.0', an evolution which online technologies allow people to create and share content, comment, and experiences without the mediation of the traditional media which can take many forms, including text, images, audio, and video.²⁷

Of course since the French Revolution, at least, victory or defeat in all major wars has hinged on the endurance of popular mobilization to the cause which in turn is a function of the popular perception of the military state of affairs. Thus we might say that perception of events has long trumped the reality and so today's virtual dimension is nothing new.²⁸ Moreover, one should never discuss propaganda in counterinsurgency without considering these words of the French officer David Galula (1919–67) in *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* which have come to be regarded as something akin to a scientific law:

The asymmetrical situation has important effects on propaganda. The insurgent, having no responsibility, is free to use every trick; if necessary, he can lie, cheat, exaggerate. He is not obliged to prove; he is judged by what he promises, not by what he does. Consequently, propaganda is a powerful weapon for him. With no positive policy but with good propaganda, the insurgent may still win.

The counterinsurgent is tied to his responsibilities and to his past, and for him, facts speak louder than words. He is judged on what he does, not on what he says. If he lies, cheats, exaggerates, and does not prove, he may achieve some temporary successes, but at the price of being discredited for good. And he cannot cheat much unless his political structures are monolithic, for the legitimate opposition in his own camp would soon disclose his every psychological maneuver. For him, propaganda can be no more than a secondary weapon, valuable only if intended to inform and not to fool. A counterinsurgent can seldom cover bad or nonexistent policy with propaganda.²⁹

But there differences from the 1960s now which this paper attempts to draw attention to. The first is that the arrival of social media and near real-time digital imagery means that the connection between the popular perception of the war and the physical battlefield is much more immediate and therefore volatile.³⁰

Messages from the theatre of operations, often in the form of images carefully crafted by the other side, emerge at a rate which makes it difficult for them to be put into context, integrated into an overarching strategic narrative, or refuted as the case may require.³¹ The level of public commitment is both cause and effect with respect to the successful conduct of modern counterinsurgency because the two exist in a feedback loop. Images of things which are done in the theatre (sometimes falsified) are communicated by a variety of means to an audience outside of it, some of whom seek actively to shape the popular perception of what these images mean in order to serve their particular cause or agenda; that perception influences political decision-makers who in turn affect what is done in the theatre of war.

Equally, Muslims in the West are radicalized by such images leading them to become combatants in the physical dimension, either as terrorists such as the July 2005 suicide bombers in London or as volunteers to the *Jihadi* cause in another theatre. In the words of the German physicist Heinrich Hertz (the first man to broadcast and receive radio waves): ‘The consequences of the images will be the images of the consequences.’³² Failing to engage with all aspects of this loop can seriously hamper the war effort. New times call for new means: fighting a ‘war of ideas’ in Web 2.0 means mastering what one might call Propaganda 2.0.

The second is that the ‘virtual dimension’ with which this paper is concerned is essentially a new form of ‘propaganda of the deed’ in which deeds, violent and otherwise, act as symbolic and rhetorical tools for combatants akin to ‘political marketing’ aimed at the formation of sympathetic support-communities. Insurgents have grasped this; counterinsurgents generally have not. Detailed causes of this are discussed below. Two overarching reasons, however, can be dealt with now:

1. The traditional conflation of a main aim of terrorist groups, ‘propaganda of the deed’, with terrorism per se has tended to make policy-makers and analysts believe that states do not do propaganda of the deed. This is wrong; it belies the fact, as noted above, that deeds speak louder than words; and, in a world in which digital images emerge from the theatre of operations and propagate worldwide in a matter of minutes, it is an attitude which leaves us open to propagandic ‘own goals’ of huge significance such as Abu Ghraib.
2. With respect to the asymmetry of propaganda Colonel Galula is, in fact, not entirely correct. There is much wisdom in the injunction that the counterinsurgent must not lie – lest he cause long-term pain to his credibility in return for short-term gain. But the insurgent can also be judged by what he *does* as well as what he says. The delta between the two is the target of the counterinsurgent propagandist.

In crude terms, the ‘bad guys’ need to, and can be made to, stand up and be counted for their acts. ‘The Insurgency’ is all too often abstracted and depersonalized which makes it amorphous and blurs the discourse. In fact

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insurgent attacks are real events involving real people: victims of violence and perpetrators of it. Separate these and you disaggregate the ethnic, religious and political components. Instead of focusing on the event itself which leaves the field open to continued reinterpretation of the underlying grievances of the attacker, the victims and the misery of their families must become the story in a counter-narrative. Their suffering is reattached to the perpetrators of extreme violence who are singled out wherever possible as individuals (self-interested and flawed criminals at that) thereby detaching them from any legitimizing ideology.³³

In short, winning the war of ideas calls for a much greater focus on managing the evolving narrative or story, because what matters is the perception of events over the long term. Too often Western media relations concentrate the bulk of their attention on the first 90 minutes of a story which is counterproductive to the extent that it overshadows the importance of the subsequent 90 days or, indeed, 90 years of narrative construction of which the particular story is but a part.

Part II Vertical narrative coherence: ‘truthiness’

Let us return, therefore, to the concept of narrative, a concept for which both the scholarly defence and security community and practicing soldiers have developed a consuming interest of late as evidenced by the recent proliferation of doctrine and guidance on ‘influence operations’. Much of the discussion of narratives in the context of contemporary warfare, as noted above, centres on the concept of strategic narratives.³⁴ What is not so well understood, however, are two things: first, that narratives operate at several levels of which the strategic level is just one and intermediate at that; and, second, that the quality of credibility or persuasiveness in the war of ideas inheres from being able to logically connect these narratives vertically.

In an oft-cited paper in the *American Sociological Review* Ann Swidler argued that there is a continuum from ‘Ideology’ through ‘Tradition’ to ‘Common Sense’ via which can be explained how culture shapes action. Ideology, says Swidler, is a ‘highly articulated, self-conscious belief and ritual system, aspiring to offer a unified answer to problems of social action’. Traditions are ‘articulated cultural beliefs and practices, but ones taken for granted so that they seem inevitable parts of life. Diverse, rather than unified, partial rather than all-embracing, they do not always inspire enthusiastic assent [but are considered natural nonetheless].’ Common sense is the set of ‘assumptions so unself-conscious as to seem a natural, transparent, undeniable part of the structure of the world’.³⁵

This three-part schema is a useful way of conceiving of the levels of narrative in the ongoing war of ideas. Specifically, with a modification of titles, we may use it to locate the areas in which Islamist narratives are proving more persuasive than our own. At the top level, akin to Swidler’s ideology, there is a cultural eschatological narrative which essentially has to do with idealized visions of the

future of humanity.³⁶ At the bottom, is a vast multitude of local or individual narratives in which people form ideas about what they should or should not do and what rewards or penalties they will incur from a particular course of action.³⁷ As the narrator of the film-noir classic *Naked City* says at the conclusion of that film ‘there are eight million stories in the Naked City’.³⁸ It is the content of these individual stories which is in contest in the war of ideas. And what links the eschatological cultural narrative with local or individual ones is strategic narrative, which maps on to Swidler’s concept of tradition.

Bear in mind that tradition, according to Swidler, is a complex of beliefs that are diverse rather than unified, partial rather than all-embracing, and are not necessarily enthusiastically embraced yet are perceived as natural or inevitable. The same may be said for strategic narratives, which is why the strategic narrative of global *Jihad* has been driven into the mainstream of the Islamic world (and a minor but significant stream everywhere else, including the West which is the target of its attack). The Islamist strategic narrative says:

- Islam is under general unjust attack by Western crusaders led by the United States;
- *Jihadis*, whom the West refers to as ‘terrorists’ are defending against this attack;
- The actions they take in defence of Islam are proportionally just and religiously sanctified; and, therefore,
- It is the duty of good Muslims to support these actions.

Any one of these points can be exploded as objectively absurd and twisted; taken together they constitute a bogus mythology. But many people believe them which serves as a case in point that strategic narratives need not be rational to be effective; rather narratives need to be internally vertically coherent to be persuasive.

One sees vertical narrative coherence in the Taliban’s ‘night letters’ which Thomas Johnson describes as representing ‘a strategic and effective instrument, crafting poetic diatribes which appeal to the moral reasoning of Afghan villagers’. While many night letters are essentially about overt intimidation, they also communicate ‘eloquently and impressively’ insights to the readers about who and what the Taliban represents. In one night letter translated by Johnson Afghan readers are told:

Today once again your sons, clerics and Taliban and the faithful people in these circumstances are fighting against non-Muslims and are serving Islam. If you don’t do anything else, at least support your Mujahedin sons and do not be impressed by the false propaganda of non-Muslim enemies.

In short, the letter effectively invokes an eschatological narrative in both Islam and Afghanistan’s illustrious history in explaining the actions of the Taliban, parsimoniously places in context in a strategic narrative the non-Muslim enemy, and enjoins the reader individually to (at the very least) not support or believe the propaganda of the outsider.³⁹ An illustration of how this motivates individuals in

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485 practice was given by a senior British military officer speaking about British
486 counterinsurgent operations in Afghanistan’s Helmand province at a recent
487 conference. He described the capture of a failed suicide bomber, a 60-year-old
488 Afghan man, who explained under interrogation why he had undertaken the
489 mission to blow up himself and as many others as he could at an Afghan/British
490 Army installation on behalf of the *Taliban*. His reasons were quite internally
491 logical:

- 492 1. He was near the end of his own life but his family was desperately poor;
493 2. He was a good Muslim who had completed the Hajj, and an Afghan (rather
494 Pashtun) patriot;
495 3. He understood from *Taliban* propaganda that the Afghans and Britons he
496 would kill were respectively apostates and infidels (and in the latter case
497 invaders to boot);
498 4. The Taliban would pay a significant sum to his family for the attack.⁴⁰
499

500 Essentially, for this particular insurgent attacking the Afghan government and
501 British forces was an honourable way out of a very difficult domestic situation.
502 That after his attack, which failed only because he fumbled the ignition wires of
503 his bomb vest and was tackled by a brave and quick-thinking Afghan soldier, he
504 came to realize that there were good Muslims on the other side and that the
505 British forces were not there to subjugate Afghanistan let alone destroy Islam was
506 a happy and rare coincidence. In thousands of other cases the vertical coherence
507 of the Islamist narrative has resulted in eager and willing recruits and explosions.

508 What is more Islamist leaders do not have to be on the air and in the
509 newspapers every day and night to propagate the basic elements of the strategic
510 narrative. Consider how many speeches Osama bin Laden has made since 9/11
511 with how many have been made by President George W. Bush and Prime
512 Minister Tony Blair. The difference must be calculated in multiples of a
513 thousand. Bin Laden and his associates do not appear endlessly on the British
514 Broadcasting Corporation, or Cable News Network or even *Al-Jazeera* defending
515 these talking points: this work is done (very effectively) by largely voluntary
516 networks which have open access, share material, work collectively, and have a
517 *diversity of motives*. Not everybody in the network needs to be a committed
518 *Jihadi*, they may or may not like the idea of living under a restored Caliphate,
519 they may indeed in some circumstances not be Muslim at all because the mindset
520 of sullen resentment, which is what animates the movement, is shared by diverse
521 groups from anti-globalists to anti-vivisectionists. Hence the vaunted Red–Green
522 coalition of the hard Left and Islamism with each cockroach in the bottle
523 forbearing feeding itself on the other until the common enemy is defeated.

524 The problem of vertical narrative coherence is represented graphically in
525 Table 1 below:

526 The US television channel *Comedy Central* may be an unusual source for an
527 important concept in an academic paper on contemporary warfare. Be that as it
528 may, in 2005 the comedian Stephen Colbert speaking on his satiric news show

Table 1. Narratives of The West and Al-Qae'da.

	The West	Al-Qae'da/Islamism
Eschatological cultural narrative	Globalization/universality of individual human rights/ democracy	Islam/Sharia/Caliphate
Strategic narrative	Diffuse and internally contradictory; multiplicity of narratives both in national variant (e.g., US vs UK, French, German and so on) and in aim (prevention of proliferation of WMD, rectification of failed states, counterterrorism, etc)	Focused and internally coherent; short; simple and straightforward
Local and individual narratives	Occurring in a 'detribalized' society which is disunified, sceptical, lacks patience and has wide access to contrary viewpoints	Occurring in a 'retribalizing' (or less 'detribalized') society which is relatively unified, patient, credulous, and has very limited access to contradictory viewpoints

'The Colbert Report' coined a term, 'truthiness', which merits real consideration.⁴¹ In essence it refers to a belief based not so much on logic, evidence, intellectual examination or fact but on a 'gut feeling'. In his words, 'Truthiness is sort of what you want to be true, as opposed to what the facts support . . . [it] is a truth larger than the facts that would comprise it – if you cared about facts, which you don't, if you care about truthiness.'⁴²

Western narratives lack 'truthiness' and, therefore, the ability to persuade because at the level of strategic narrative where what is required is a concise statement of what it is doing, why, and how that links a positive vision of the future with the individual actions of members of its own society and members of other societies whom it wishes to influence, is missing. The oft-cited 'democratization' is not a strategic narrative; it is an eschatological narrative which actually resonates quite strongly with Muslim audiences;⁴³ what democratization rhetoric does not do is explain all our strategic actions, particularly the war in Iraq – indeed in that case the perceived contradiction between the aims of the war and its actual conduct has drained US and British credibility with Muslim audiences to the delight of Islamists who really do hate democracy.

Part III The 'theatre of operations'

Let us look in more detail now at the transformed operational environment. General Sir Rupert Smith in his seminal 2005 book *The Utility of Force* provides a compelling illustration of the problem of perception in contemporary conflict:

...we fight and operate amongst the people in a wider sense: through the media . . . Whoever coined the phrase 'the theatre of operations' was very prescient.

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We are conducting operations now as though we are on stage, in an amphitheatre or Roman arena. There are two or more sets of players – both with a producer, the commander, each of whom has his own idea of the script. On the ground, in the actual theatre, they are all on the stage and mixed up with people trying to get to their seats, the stage hands, the ticket collectors and the ice-cream vendors. At the same time they are being viewed by a partially and factional audience, comfortably seated, its attention focused on that part of the auditorium where it is noisiest, watching the events by peering down the drinking straws of their soft-drink packs – for that is the extent of the vision of a camera.⁴⁴

The only problem with this conceptualization of the confusion of the theatre of operations is that it does not go far enough because implicit in it is an understanding of the media which is out of date. It is not completely true that we operate *through* the media (or more accurately what is now called the ‘mainstream media’ comprising large broadcast and print media such as the BBC).⁴⁵ That is because just as the advent of the Information Age has transformed the weapons, command and control systems and sensors which give our armed forces an edge in the physical battle, it has also transformed the way in which ideas are propagated in the form of words and images. The effect of ‘Web 2.0’ has been to ‘democratize’ mass communication (perhaps more accurately to reduce the costs of being a broadcaster to the price of a computer and an Internet connection) which is immensely empowering for individuals and small groups and, to a still uncertain extent, disempowering of large organizations.⁴⁶ As far as warfare is concerned, there are three main changes.

Combatants on all sides can be their own reporters

Armed Forces are struggling with the challenge of fighting wars in what might aptly be called the ‘Nokia Age’ of digital cameras, mobile phones and a ubiquitous Internet. Because it is not normally embedded journalists who are capturing and disseminating images of the battlefield it is the soldiers themselves. Indeed, as was described in a review of a collection of books on Iraq War reportage in the *London Review of Books* while typically reporters like to get out and about, talk to people and get a feel for street vibe, in Iraq this simply is not possible for more than an intrepid few Western reporters. One *Wall Street Journal* reporter noted his frustration in an email to family and friends:

Can’t eat in restaurants ... can’t look for stories, can’t travel in anything but a full armoured car ... can’t be stuck in traffic, can’t speak English outside ... can’t say I’m an American, can’t linger at checkpoints, can’t be curious about what people are saying, doing, feeling. And can’t and can’t.⁴⁷

As a result Western reporters must rely on local reporters and translators to be their eyes and ears on the ground. But much of the imagery of the actual battlefield is shot by soldiers themselves and distributed via the Internet, as one can easily see from the thousands of clips on sites such as *YouTube* and *LiveLeak*.⁴⁸

A recent story illustrates the way in which this perturbs commanders. When a Canadian unit was ambushed by insurgents in Afghanistan a soldier caught the

action on his own camera. The film found its way onto the Web within less than 48 hours. Said the news report on the event:

Welcome to the wired battlefield, where many Canadian soldiers on the front line have a small digital camera tucked beside their guns.

Thanks to those cameras – and easy Internet access at the main base at Kandahar Airfield – soldiers are sending back pictures and videos to family members, friends as well as blogs and websites like YouTube.

‘Everybody there seems to own a camera’, said one soldier who has served in Afghanistan.⁴⁹

As the Canadian defence analyst Doug Bland observed in the article, there are two ways that the military could react to this situation. The first would be to try to censor what comes out of the battlefield. The second would be to ‘enjoin them [rather] than fight them’: regulate how digital media is used and gain the cooperation of soldiers in shaping the narrative of the conflict. It does not take a strategic genius to see why simple censorship would be a tempting option. However, it is sure to fail. The ubiquity of the camera on the battlefield (which is necessary for many reasons including the realization of the aim of having a networked force) makes it inevitable that images will be taken. And what exists will eventually get out. ‘It’s not the scandal, it’s the cover up’, ought to be regarded as another scientific law of information warfare. That being the case, the military must accept the dangers and work to minimize them while seizing any opportunities which may avail – as the other side has done.

The innovative use by insurgents in Iraq of web-based media is increasingly well documented.⁵⁰ Their sophisticated media campaign includes daily press releases, weekly and monthly magazines, video clips and full-length films; in this way they are having a considerable degree of success creating an alternate reality in which to win hearts and minds. Less well studied is the opposite phenomenon: the undirected outpouring of combat footage filmed by coalition troops or gun-camera/drone footage of attacks upon or by insurgents which makes its way onto video-sharing sites.

For the purposes of this discussion the important point here is that Western output is *undirected*; *Jihadis* make deliberate use of the new media in order to further its cause; the spontaneous reporting of Western soldiers is, by contrast, usually viewed as a threat. Only very recently has the North Atlantic Treaty Organization begun to consider *YouTube* an integral part of the battlefield which it is trying to shape.⁵¹ Similarly, the military approach to ‘milblogs’ (blogs written by soldiers on active service) has been ambivalent: a mixture of suspicion mixed with cautious curiosity. For instance, US Army Regulation 530-1: Operations Security (OPSEC) showed acute sensitivity to the risks of ‘milblogs’:

In recent years, the Internet has become an ever-greater source of open source information for adversaries of the US, websites in particular, especially personal websites of individual Soldiers (to include web logs or ‘blogs’), are a potentially significant vulnerability.⁵²

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The regulation enjoined all Army personnel to consult with their immediate supervisor and their OPSEC Officer for an OPSEC review prior to publishing or posting information in a public forum.⁵³ And an Army Web Risk Assessment Cell (AWRAC) was established with responsibility for reviewing the content of the Army's publicly accessible websites as well as, 'Conduct routine checks of web sites on the World Wide Web for disclosure of critical and/or sensitive information that is deemed a potential OPSEC compromise.'⁵⁴

The new regulation was greeted initially with anger by those in the milblogging community. 'This is the final nail in the coffin for combat blogging,' said retired paratrooper Matthew Burden, editor of *The Blog of War* anthology. 'No more military bloggers writing about their experiences in the combat zone. This is the best PR the military has – it's most honest voice out of the war zone. And it's being silenced.'⁵⁵

However, the regulation does not seem to have significantly diminished the enthusiasm for milblogging. As of August 2007 the website *Milblogging.com* was aggregating some 1,794 milblogs.⁵⁶ Moreover, the US Army shortly after it issued the regulation released a fact sheet entitled 'Army Operations Security: Soldier Blogging Unchanged' clarifying its position: essentially that soldiers should blog on military issues responsibly and take care of OPSEC considerations.⁵⁷ And a prize-winning paper by an Army public affairs officer appeared in the *Military Review* arguing that 'qualified support of milblogs is good policy'. While there are threats to milblogs they should not be overstated (most soldiers understand the need for operational security) and the opportunities far outweigh them. Most importantly:

The Army can reinforce its communications with the mainstream media by declaring its independence from it using the tools of the modern information domain. Without question, the domestic and international media are not a neutral force on the battlefield, and winning modern wars requires both battlefield success and mobilization of domestic and international public opinion. By communicating directly with the American public, using the Internet to provide accurate, timely information that previously was available only from the media – if and when they chose to report it – the Army now positively influences public discussion.⁵⁸

In other words, there are tentative signs that the counterinsurgents are beginning to grasp the nature of the virtual dimension and how to operate in it, but the insurgents are still way ahead on this particular learning curve.

Amateurs can surpass professionals

It follows from the above that opinion formers are no longer as closely tied to traditional media as they were. Indeed, in the virtual dimension anyone with a digital camera, a laptop and an Internet connection can play. While single-issue unaffiliated amateur reporters are unlikely to rival traditional outlets in readership overall, on their particular subjects only a few years after it became possible for such a form of reporting a handful of them have gained a voice comparable to

traditional media at a fraction of the cost. Moreover, arguably the relationship of the reader with such non-traditional journalists is more intimate and trusting than is the case with traditional media. This is strongly suggested, at least anecdotally, by the comments on Michael Yon's highly popular *Dispatches* series.⁵⁹ The following are typical:

Ivo Vegter Says: I hate to sound gushing, but I keep meaning to thank you for reminding me, and the world, what old school reporting is really about. You not only put the US media to shame, but your work gives those of us outside the US a rare and much needed glimpse of the real war in Iraq ... 30 August 2007 at 2:11 pm

John Letarte Says: Mike, Great reporting – I have followed you from the start and truly appreciate your work. I am immensely glad for the morale effect I know you have on our troops. You seem to be the voice crying out in the darkness – and it seems to be dawn ... 30 August 2007 at 3:44 pm

Farok Says: Hi Mr Michail I am very sorry to my English is not good but i try to write to you about what i feels to you:My name is Farok 52 years old from Kurdistan-Iraq but now i live in sweden before 16 years ago. Really i like you because you are very strong to visit IRAQ with your Camera and you know Iraq,s situation with terror. I and my family have big big respekt to you and please bi carfull about your self because terrorists like wild animal and they live with out heart and they don,t feels any thing ... 30 August 2007 at 4:41 pm⁶⁰

Although traditional media still predominates, some amateur reporters filing original stories to their own blogs are attracting online audiences which are a significant fraction of what professionals in some of the largest traditional media outlets are managing.⁶¹

Readers play a role in deciding what is news

As the comments of Michael Yon's readers suggest, a final change of large consequence is that audiences are no longer passive consumers of information; on the contrary readers are able to shape the news agenda and the debate over the news through means which are unique to Web 2.0. In traditional news, editors decide what is and what is not newsworthy. By contrast, Internet news sites such as *Digg* and *Reddit* are presenting an alternative where readers post links to stories from sites that *they* think are newsworthy.⁶² Other readers hit a 'digg' button if they like the story or a 'bury it' button if they do not. The most popular stories appear prominently on the front page; unpopular stories lie hidden many pages below. Users are encouraged to comment on stories in discussion threads where they can argue for or against the points made in the original article while also introducing new information, usually in the form of links to counter-arguments; they can also give comments a 'thumbs up' or 'thumbs down' which affects the way in which comments are presented to subsequent readers;⁶³ or they can flag an item as offensive, a common tactic on *YouTube* to cause the removal of clips.⁶⁴

The social media system is increasingly recognized as being vulnerable to manipulation by those seeking to move particular ideas for commercial purposes

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(for instance a fake story on *Digg* on the recall of several hundred thousand Sony Playstation 3s affected Sony's stock).⁶⁵ What is less well-recognized is how it is used by those seeking to move particular ideas for political purposes. The phenomenon is not exclusive to *Digg* by any means. Popular websites from *YouTube* through *BBC News* and most major newspapers offer mechanisms by which readers can comment on articles or videos and influence how prominently items are represented. This is not to say that such comments necessarily affect the decisions of the editors of these papers; rather they influence the perception of readers of those articles and comments in ways in which the editor may not have intended or considered.

Fundamentally, the news cycle is no longer a closed one with government and media spinning each other while the public looks on passively; the public is now an active player and because of the architecture of social media small groups are able to direct the news in ways that serve their political ends through the manipulation of discussion forums and comments pages as well as the generation of counter-analyses. The global insurgents have recognized this fact. For instance, in June 2007 the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) announced a media campaign the declared purpose of which was to counter the messages against the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) put out by Arab and Western media agencies and to stop the increasing military campaign against the ISI by Sunni organizations in Iraq. In a message titled 'The Battar Media Raid: How to Participate? How to Help? What Is My Role?' the campaign's goals and methods, including infiltrating non-Islamic forums for the purpose of posting pro-ISI propaganda were described:

What we expect from you brothers and sisters is for the [Islamist] forum to be like beehives during the raid ... [whereby] one person takes part in distributing [material] ... another generates links ... one person writes an article ... while another writes a poem ... People must feel and notice that the forums have changed radically during this blessed raid ... beloved [raid participants], the raid is dependent on you ... The raid demands of you many things ... such as expertise, especially in the following areas: seeking religious knowledge, montage, translation into any language, uploading material onto various types of websites, web design, graphic design, journal and publication design, and hacking and security. If you have expertise in any of these [fields], contact the GIMF representative on any of the forums. If, however, you do not possess this expertise ... there are other matters you can [promote]: for example, posting matters related to the raid in most [jihad] forums ... posting [material] in non-jihad forums, posting in non-Islamic forums such as music forums, youth forums, sports forums, and others.⁶⁶

Meanwhile, global counterinsurgents are still figuring out how to deal with this virtual dimension – not all have recognized that it exists or that its existence matters.

In the virtual dimension the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, participants and non-participants, observed and observer becomes blurred. In a *Daily Telegraph* opinion column editorial Andrew Marr hinted at what this would mean for future wars: 'If ordinary troops can film anything and store it in tiny chips, or send it straight on, then the gap between what actually

happens in war and what the domestic audience knows about has been closed.⁶⁷ On the one hand, one might say that Marr is falling into the journalist's conceit-trap which says 'that which is reported is true'. The reporting by traditional media of the real battlefield is only a part of the virtual dimension. But Marr does have his finger on something important. Still and moving imagery from the battlefield in such volume, timeliness, and form (i.e., digital and thereby easy to propagate and edit) and from a non-journalist perspective is a new thing which is making a big difference in the conduct of modern insurgency; but the way in which that difference is made useful is by the harnessing of that live-feed to political purpose by the addition to it of judgment, evaluation, subjectivity, selection bias, spin, and so on. The power of the 'image' converted into propaganda is awesome. Proof of the point is exemplified by Michael Moore's artful 'documentary' on the presidency of George W. Bush, *Fahrenheit 911*.

The irony, not lost on the other side, is that when it comes to cultural-ideational output the West is hugely dominant. After all, the world's best propagandists live and work in places like London and New York: but they work in advertising and their war concerns convincing people of such things as that their lives would be more perfect if only they could shave with a razor with three blades instead of merely two. We do brand-marketing very well and our politics have become an involved process of political-marketing.⁶⁸ In both cases Western societies devote huge financial and manpower resources to the minute shifting of perceptions of consumers and voters on things such as what is fashionable and for whom should they vote. To the ideologues of the Islamic world the West represents a nigh-irresistible and insensate force of cultural contamination and ideational infiltration. That is why they fear Britney Spears and Barbie more than they fear Joint Direct-Action Munitions and Tomahawk cruise missiles. In other words, at the eschatological narrative level what animates Islamists is the gnawing concern that globalization and democratization which they perceive as little different from Westernization are enormously powerful and need resisting by the most extreme means.

Yet when it comes to the purposeful waging of 'societal-ideational' campaigns through propaganda the West is laggard because it mistrusts and misunderstands the concept and does not apply it well in the virtual dimension. We have not figured out how to apply marketing muscle to warfare in quite the same way we do in other spheres of human endeavour. Indeed, our efforts in this sphere have mostly come to naught where they have been tried at all. On the other hand, Al-Qa'eda has had great success. As Jason Burke put it:

You may not like what he is saying. You may abhor everything he stands for. But you are listening . . . The truth is that Osama bin Laden is very good at what he does. He is one of the great propagandists . . . He has an awesome understanding of the holy triumvirate of political communication: the power of the image, the message and the deed. And he understands how they work together.⁶⁹

Al-Qa'eda's leadership seems intuitively to have grasped how to harness the potential of the Internet to the furtherance of its strategic aims. Proof of this is the

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striking success it has had in shaping public opinion in favour of its basic strategic narrative that Islam is under general, unrelenting attack by Western ‘crusaders’ led by the United States and that therefore attacks against the United States and its allies are religiously sanctified acts of defence. It is a twisted worldview that justifies such things as the purposeful annihilation by religious sociopaths of innocents by the thousands in suicide bombings, or the kidnap, torture and videotaped beheading of diverse individuals on the logic that this is defence against a belligerent West bent on dividing, humiliating, and eventually conquering Islam. But many Muslims (and some non-Muslims) now believe this to be true.⁷⁰

Returning to Andrew Marr’s point, he wrote ‘warfare has depended for centuries on a rampart of silence, a wall of willed incomprehension, between civilians at home and those killing. In a small way, the arrival of digital photography has broken through that wall’.⁷¹ Put differently, the centre of gravity is, as it always has been, the mindset and will of the people but now the people via social media are active participants in the contest to shape and influence that mindset in a way and to an extent which they have never been before. The ‘war of ideas’ is quintessentially a ‘war amongst the people’, to use Rupert Smith’s phrase, and the virtual battlefield dominates the real because ‘successful’ operations on the ground make no difference if they are not translated into advancements of one’s position in the informational realm.

This was well illustrated in a *Los Angeles Times* article which described the tour of Major General James Mattis through US Marine outposts in Al-Anbar province, Iraq. The general was asked by a sergeant ‘How are we supposed to fight a war when people back home say we’ve already lost?’ Mattis gave the best answer he could to his soldier under the circumstances: believe your own eyes, ignore the press.⁷² But at the end of the day this will not cut it. When the success or failure of the operation known as ‘The Surge’ is judged, the morale state of the Marines in Anbar will not count for much if the people at home have been convinced the whole war is a lost cause – a point which is not lost on partisans on either side of the Iraq War debate.⁷³

Part IV Fight the war of ideas like a ‘real war’?

A few scholars and analysts are beginning to treat the war of ideas for what it really is, the centrepiece of the confrontation which is popularly called the ‘Global War on Terror’ or the ‘Long War’, as it is now officially termed, and to propose more appropriate strategies and operations. One of the most interesting of these is J. Michael Waller who in his book *Fighting the ‘War of Ideas’ Like a Real War* argues that words and images are vital strategic weapons which the West under- or poorly employs. In this he is entirely correct. He also argues, however, that the West should practice a form of semantic infiltration of Islamist discourse. Writes Waller:

How great it would be if we could use Arabic words and Muslim terms to denounce the terrorists as sociopaths instead of holy warriors. As waging an unholy war on

innocent society instead of fighting the good fight for God. As murderers instead of martyrs. As plagues that must be wiped out – and preferably by their own people. The good news is that we can. Best of all, Muslims and speakers of Arabic across the ideological spectrum traditionally accept the terminology as we would like it to mean. We just need to embrace and promote the words in our own discourse and messages.⁷⁴

For example, instead of using the laudatory Islamic term *Jihad* to describe the actions of our enemies we should use the derogatory Islamic term ‘*hirabah*’ which has the meaning of killing a defenceless victim by stealth in a manner intended to cause terror. In this he is only partially correct and wrong in ways which risk further setbacks in the strategic conflict which counts most.

The basic problem with this otherwise worthy idea is its focus on what is essentially an intra-Muslim debate. There is a ‘war for Muslim minds’, as Gilles Kepel put it, going on over the interpretation of *Jihad* and the relationship of Islam with the West.⁷⁵ But this war is not one in which we, as outsiders, have a major role to play. The cause of global *Jihad* should be allowed to falter as a result of the actions of the Islamists themselves causing the revulsion of Muslims in general for the extremists in their midst. We should avoid prolonging this process by engaging in a debate in which whatever we say could easily backfire because it is crude and unsubtle (as the interjections of outsiders almost inevitably are) and thus easily manipulated.

What we ought to do is recognize that, at root, the global insurgency is a fight over credibility in a radically inter-connected world. If we say that the ‘Long War’ is a war of ideas then that means it is a war to gain adherents to ideas which are spread through various modes of communication not least the Internet but also by propaganda of the deed. The link between ideas, or information, and power is best conceptualized in Joseph Nye’s theory of ‘soft’ versus ‘hard’ power:

A plenitude of information leads to a poverty of attention. When we are overwhelmed with the volume of information confronting us, it is hard to know what to focus on. Attention rather than information becomes the scarce resource, and those who can distinguish valuable signals from white noise gain power. Editors, filters, and cue givers become more in demand, and this is a source of power for those who can tell us where to focus our attention . . . Among editors and cue givers, credibility is the crucial resource and an important source of power.⁷⁶

If Nye is right then the best way to view the conflict in the virtual dimension is as a contest of credibility. Some advocates of soft power may be tempted to argue that a war of ideas may only be fought with words, which would be wrong because it unbalances the equation in so far as it suggests that insurgents may use words and deeds (including violence) but counterinsurgents are barred from anything other than words; in fact *both* speak through their words and deeds and need to keep the two in narrative alignment while remaining sensitive to the multiple audiences whom they wish to address simultaneously.

Unfortunately, the West, particularly the Bush administration, has tended to think of credibility in a peculiarly outdated and narrowly focused way in terms of

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the ability and resolve to deter other potentially hostile states or leaders who fear retaliation for their actions because they value their lives and power. But this form of credibility does not apply in the contest with global *Jihad* which does not fear retaliation – because it is not practical in most cases to attack it with military force and more importantly because trying to do so usually acts as a recruiting tool for it. What is lost is the sense of credibility as the quality of being able to work within the information environment in a way that influences the beliefs of others to one's own advantage. Meanwhile, the other side is masterful at managing the information environment; if they were not they would be dead and forgotten. Insurgents, like editors, advance their importance by having, or fighting for, the impression of credibility. And if credibility is the key in the Information Age that presents most states with a dilemma and many non-state actors with an opportunity: because soft power is the domain in which non-governmental actors such as Al-Qa'eda are best placed to compete. That is the only place where they possess any chance of comparative advantages.

From a grand strategic perspective this is a major challenge. From a military perspective, however, it is less so. In fact, there are opportunities to be seized which currently are not. Nye speaks of 'poverty of attention' and of 'credibility [as] the crucial resource'. The first scares the military because where there is a poverty of attention there is likely to be a deficit of patience and therefore of political will which are the essential qualities of successful counterinsurgency. The second is what should scare the media because if the Information Age is a challenge to the military it is even more of a challenge to the media which has traditionally interposed itself between the news (whatever its source) and the public. The advent of social media means that this traditional monolithic interposition is both unnecessary and suspect because there are vastly more sources of information, and infinitude of comment, and progressively an increasing public awareness that the longstanding claims of the media to objectivity are false. Look at any national ranking of occupations by esteem, the last position is a running contest between politicians, journalists and lawyers – soldiers, by contrast, are held in relatively high esteem.

Conclusion: Insurgency and counterinsurgency in the 'global village'

In their 2006 book *Failing to Win* Tierney and Johnson argue persuasively that perceptions of victory and defeat matter. The virtual dimension which this article discusses may be intangible but that does not diminish its importance.

In ancient wars of conquest . . . clarity of result was more common. But undeniable triumph is the exception in most of the crises and wars of today. In these more ambiguous circumstances, observers searching for an evaluation – pushed by elite manipulation, pulled by the media – fall back on cognitive shortcuts and gut feelings to make their way through the complex information available to them. On their highly subjective and often deeply skewed judgments rests the destiny of leaders, their states, and their peoples.⁷⁷

The findings of this article support this contention and carry the discussion of the relationship of words and deeds in wartime into a consideration of the now emerging social media which changes the rules of the media–military–government ‘game’ in significant ways. Key to understanding the new operating environment is accepting a redefinition of an old concept: propaganda of the deed. Traditionally an aspect of the study of terrorism, propaganda of the deed is widely thought of as exclusively the province of terrorism (indeed the two are sometimes used synonymously). But this is wrong because nowadays both sides in the ‘war of ideas’ conduct propaganda by deed in a radically globally interconnected information environment; the trouble is that one side recognizes and embraces this fact while the other basically does not – with predictable results.

There is no doubt that this means the landscape of insurgency, which was never very simple in the first place, is shaping up to be an order of magnitude more complex in the twenty-first century. Of complicating factors the most significant are globalization which has been defined as,

The inexorable integration of markets, nation-states and technologies to a degree never witnessed before – in a way that is enabling individuals, corporations and nation-states to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper and cheaper than ever before, and in a way that is enabling the world to reach into individuals, corporations and nation-states farther, faster, deeper, and cheaper than ever before.⁷⁸

And the emergence of a global insurgent movement which is animated by religious ideology and which purports to represent the true will of a community of faith which is transnational:

the United States and its allies are not facing a religion – Islam – as their main enemy, but an ideology, namely the Salafi-jihad. The fact that the Salafi-jihad is no ordinary secular ideology, but a religious one, however, is of additional significance because it renders the attempt to challenge that ideology far more complex. Salafi-jihadists employ religious rhetoric and symbols to advance their cause. Although they selectively pick from the Islamic tradition only those elements that advance their narrow agenda, they nevertheless draw from the same religious sources that inform the lives and practices of more than a billion other Muslims. It is for that reason that ordinary Muslims – not to speak of non-Muslims – find it particularly difficult and dangerous to challenge Salafi-jihadists without running the risk of being accused of targeting Islam as a whole.⁷⁹

The upshot of the combination of these factors is to make the potential audience global while also fracturing it into segments. The effect of deeds, propagandic acts or words is not homogeneous. On the contrary the same deed sends out different messages and resonates in different ways simultaneously to potentially multiple audiences. For instance, the previously noted failed suicide bombing in Afghanistan was meant: operationally, to cause shock in the local and international media and thereby draw attention to the cause; tactically, to engage the counterinsurgent forces and provoke retaliation; communicatively, to attach itself to underlying grievances both local and transnational; and, strategically, to expand the Islamist constituency by showing boldness in attack and also enticing threatened governments to meet violence with violence, thereby further

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delegitimizing their authority. Thus we may say the target audiences were respectively:

1. the local political economy;
2. hierarchical politics, that is the sovereignty of the Afghan state;
3. ethnic and tribal identity politics; and,
4. ideological politics on the scale of a global *umma*.

Both the insurgent and counterinsurgent propagandist, therefore, are presented with a thorny problem of market segmentation and targeting.⁸⁰ Ironically, Islamist insurgents, more than any other actor in the international scene so far, have mastered the arts of marketing for warlike purpose. By contrast, state-based counterinsurgents have not managed the shift nearly as well. As one perspicacious airman put it in the *Marine Corps Gazette* ‘Not to put too fine a point on it but . . . the Flintstones are adapting faster than the Jetsons.’⁸¹

This is perhaps to be expected. Unlike Al-Qa’eda, for instance, the West has far more baggage to shift: the vast machinery of entire states and not just their armed forces. These are hugely powerful instruments. Global *Jihad* has nothing close to the physical resources of even the smallest Western state. But in the virtual dimension all that power simply does not count for much. What is required in the virtual dimension is the power to *persuade*, to purposefully shape the beliefs of others for one’s own objectives. In a word: propaganda (though no good propagandist will use the term).

As this paper has argued we are lagging in the virtual dimension for four main reasons.

First, we do not take it seriously enough and therefore the tools we try to fight with are not fit for purpose.

Second, to the extent we do engage in the virtual dimension we concentrate too much on shifting Muslim opinion on an aspect of their religious faith that we as outsiders cannot effectively voice an opinion on. This is not to say we have not a stake in the outcome of that debate. We obviously do. But the surest way to make it go against us is to get involved in it.

Third, we pay almost no attention to the audience to which we have access and understand: our own population, which includes Muslims in the West whose allegiance to global *Jihad* is what Islamists crave more than anything.

Fourth, our efforts at narrative construction falter because they lack vertical coherence.

In his far seeing classic *Understanding Media* Marshall McLuhan wrote ‘As electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village’.⁸² Whether or not this was true when he wrote it in 1964 it is very much true now. It is far too soon for any social scientist or historian to tackle seriously the question of the impact of the Internet on human society. We can say with confidence, however, that the impact is very large and that it is manifest in practically every aspect of human enterprise, including warfare. Global insurgents have grasped how to conduct warfare in the Global village. Global counterinsurgents should take the lesson.

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Notes

1. On the 'war of ideas' see, *inter alia*: Phares, *Future Jihad* and *Winning the 'war of ideas'*; Waller *Fighting the 'war of ideas' like a Real War*; Kilcullen, 'Countering Global Insurgency', 597–617; and Vlahos, 'Losing Mythic Authority'.
2. Rumsfeld, 'New Realities in the Media Age'.
3. The theme of our armed forces institutional unpreparedness is developed in Olson, 'War Without a Center of Gravity: Reflections on Terrorism and Post-Modern War', in which he writes: 'our institutional arrangements – government or private industry, our mental frameworks, our technical capabilities, vast and considerable though they are, are all geared to a different ratio than the threat we now face. It is like trying to work on a car using metric standards with non-metric tools. Nothing fits.' (p. 578).
4. The provisions of the Smith-Mundt Act, Title 22, Chapter 18, Subchapter V, Section 1461, on the 'Dissemination of Information Abroad' can be viewed on the US Code Collection hosted by Cornell University Law School: http://www4.law.cornell.edu/uscode/22/usc_sec_22_00001461----000-.html; see also Murphy and White, 'Propaganda: Can a Word Decide a War?', 15–27. Forgotten is that the intent of Smith-Mundt was to repair what was seen as a dysfunctional propaganda system (by creating the now defunct US Information Agency) not to forbid propagandizing. Concern not to transgress the bounds set out in Smith-Mundt are clear in the recently declassified *Information Operations Roadmap*, which states 'Future Operations require that PSOP capabilities be improved to enable PSYOP [psychological operations] forces to rapidly generate and disseminate audience specific, commercial-quality products into denied areas, and that these products focus on aggressive behavior modification of adversaries at the operational and tactical level of war. The likelihood that PSYOP messages will be replayed to a much broader audience, including the American public, requires that specific boundaries be established for PSYOP.' (15–16) See also Armstrong, 'What the SecDef Didn't Call For, But Should Have', <http://www.smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/11/what-the-secdef-didnt-call-for/>.
5. Hammes, 'War Evolves into the Fourth Generation', 206.
6. Tierney, 'America's Quagmire Mentality', 47–65.
7. Blumenthal, 'Taxi to the Dark Side: An Open Letter, openDemocracy', http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/america_inside_out/taxi_to_the_dark_side.
8. Halloran, 'Strategic Communication', 7.
9. The issues are discussed by Carothers, *US Democracy Promotion During and After Bush*, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/democracy_promotion_after_bush_final.pdf.
10. Smith, *The Utility of Force*, 16–18 and 371–2.
11. Smith, 1.
12. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 370.
13. Howard, 'A Long War?', 11.
14. See Douglas, 'Waging the Inchoate War: Defining, Fighting and Second-Guessing the Long War', 398.
15. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*.
16. Vlahos, 'The Long War: A Self-defeating Prophecy', http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Front_Page/HI09Aa01.html.

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- 1101 17. Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs*, 22.
- 1102 18. Ibid., 22–3.
- 1103 19. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 374.
- 1104 20. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 374–5.
- 1105 21. Roy, *Globalized Islam*, 183.
- 1106 22. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind*, 6.
- 1107 23. Dao and Schmitt, 'Pentagon Readies Efforts to Sway Sentiments Abroad', A1.
- 1108 24. Quoted in Eric Schmitt and James Dao, 'A "Damaged" Information Office is
1109 Declared Closed by Rumsfeld', *New York Times*, 27 February 2002.
- 1110 25. Der Derian, 'The Rise and Fall of the Office of Strategic Influence'.
- 1111 26. See Baines et al., 'Muslim Voices: The British Muslim Response to Islamic Video-
1112 Polemic—An Exploratory Study'.
- 1113 27. For an early definition see O'Reilly, 'What is Web 2.0'. <http://www.oreillynet.com/lpt/a/6228> Examples of main 'social media' (another term for Web 2.0) applications are:
- 1114 • Blogs: Blogs of War, Milblogging.com
- 1115 • Wikis: Wikipedia
- 1116 • Social networking: MySpace and Facebook
- 1117 • Video sharing: YouTube and LiveLeak
- 1118 • Virtual Reality and On-Line Gaming: Second Life and World of Warcraft
- 1119 • News aggregation: Digg and Reddit
- 1120 • Photo sharing: Flickr and Zooomr
- 1121 • Livecasting: TalkShoe
- 1122 • Media sharing: Izimi and Google Docs
- 1123 • Social bookmarking: del.icio.us.
- 1124 28. This theme is developed more fully in an analysis of the perception of victory in the
1125 1962 Cuban missile crisis, the 1968 Tet offensive in the Vietnam War, the 1973 Yom
1126 Kippur War, the 1992–94 US intervention in Somalia, and America's ongoing wars
1127 – the war on terror and the war in Iraq – by Tierney and Johnson in *Failing to Win: Perceptions of Victory and Defeat in International Politics*.
- 1128 29. Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, 14–15.
- 1129 30. See Cronin, 'Cyber-mobilization: The New Levee en Masse'.
- 1130 31. For an illustration see Kalb and Seivetz, *The Israeli-Hezbollah War of 2006: The
1131 Media as a Weapon in Asymmetrical Conflict*.
- 1132 32. Quoted in McLuhan and Fiore, *War and Peace in the Global Village*, 16.
- 1133 33. For more on propaganda of the deed see Bolt, David Betz, and Azari, *Propaganda of
1134 the Deed 2008*.
- 1135 34. Of which Douglas's 'Waging the Inchoate War' is an excellent example.
- 1136 35. Swidler, 'Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies', 279.
- 1137 36. Generally it is the monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) which are
1138 most concerned with eschatology (end of the world). Philosophical eschatology,
1139 however, is a more expansive concept. For instance, 'globalization' viewed in 'End
1140 of History' terms (See Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*) as a triumph
1141 of Western liberal market values and modes of political organization and behaviour,
1142 may be viewed as an eschatology.
- 1143 37. For a practical analysis of narratives at this level see Johnson, 'The Taliban
1144 Insurgency and an Analysis of *Shabnamah* (Night Letters)', 317–44.
- 1145 38. *The Naked City* (1948). Director Jules Dassin. Universal Pictures, 1948.
- 1146 39. Johnson, 'The Taliban Insurgency', 321–2.
- 1147 40. From a closed discussion held at a workshop organized by the Insurgency Research
1148 Group of the Department of War Studies, King's College London on 'Propaganda of
1149 the Deed 2008', London, 18 January 2008.

- 1145 41. The Colbert Report.
- 1146 42. 'Quoted in Monica Davey, '2005: In a Word – Truthiness', *New York Times*,
1147 25 December 2005.
- 1148 43. See the statistical publications by the Pew Global Attitudes Project. For example:
1149 Kohut, 'Arab and Muslim Perceptions of the United States', [http://pewresearch.org/
1150 pubs/6/arab-and-muslim-perceptions-of-the-united-states](http://pewresearch.org/pubs/6/arab-and-muslim-perceptions-of-the-united-states).
- 1151 44. Smith, *The Utility of Force*, 284–5.
- 1152 45. See Alfred Hermida, 'Young challenge mainstream media', BBC News online,
1153 3 May 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4962794.stm>.
- 1154 46. Reynolds, *An Army of Davids*.
- 1155 47. See Harding, 'Short Cuts'.
- 1156 48. For example, on YouTube two clips 'Iraq War: The Soldiers' and 'Iraq Marine Battle
1157 Fallujah' had as of 15 August 2007 been viewed respectively 305, 749 and 398,398
1158 times. I thank my colleague Theo Farrell for bringing this review to my attention.
1159 His take on the issue can be seen on our blog: [http://kingsofwar.wordpress.com/
1160 2007/11/30/reporting-from-iraq/](http://kingsofwar.wordpress.com/2007/11/30/reporting-from-iraq/).
- 1161 49. Bruce Campion-Smith, 'Fighting a War in a Digital Age', TheStar.com
1162 (23 November 2007), <http://www.thestar.com/article/279210>.
- 1163 50. See for example, Mimmage and Ridolfo, *Iraqi Insurgent Media*, [http://realaudio.
1164 rferl.org/online/OLPDFfiles/insurgent.pdf](http://realaudio.rferl.org/online/OLPDFfiles/insurgent.pdf).
- 1165 51. See Newton, 'NATO's new Afghan battleground: YouTube', [http://www.cnn.com/
1166 2007/WORLD/asiapcf/11/28/nato.youtube/?iref=mpstoryview](http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/11/28/nato.youtube/?iref=mpstoryview)
- 1167 52. Regulation 530–1: Operations Security (OPSEC), 36, [http://kingsofwar.files.
1168 wordpress.com/2007/12/ar530-1.pdf](http://kingsofwar.files.wordpress.com/2007/12/ar530-1.pdf).
- 1169 53. Ibid., 4. Public forum 'includes, but is not limited to letters, resumes, articles for
1170 publication, electronic mail (e-mail), Web site postings, web log (blog) postings,
1171 discussion in Internet information forums, discussion in Internet message boards or
1172 other forms of dissemination or documentation'.
- 1173 54. Ibid., 11–12.
- 1174 55. Quoted by Noah Shachtman in 'Army Squeezes Soldier Blogs, Maybe to Death',
1175 *Wired*, 2 May 2007, [http://www.wired.com/politics/onlinerights/news/2007/05/
1176 army_bloggers](http://www.wired.com/politics/onlinerights/news/2007/05/army_bloggers). See also Burden, *The Blog of War*.
- 1177 56. See 'Most Favorited Milblogs from Iraq Frontlines', [http://milblogging.com/iraq.
1178 frontlines.php](http://milblogging.com/iraq.frontlines.php) and 'Most Favorited Milblogs from Iraq Frontlines', [http://milblogging.
1179 com/afghanistan.frontlines.php](http://milblogging.com/afghanistan.frontlines.php).
- 1180 57. Fact Sheet Army Operations Security: Soldier Blogging Unchanged, US Army
1181 Public Affairs (2 May 2007), [http://kingsofwar.files.wordpress.com/2007/12/
1182 blog050207.pdf](http://kingsofwar.files.wordpress.com/2007/12/blog050207.pdf).
- 1183 58. Robbins, 'Muddy Boots IO: The Rise of Soldier Blogs'.
- 1184 59. See Michael Yon: Online Magazine, <http://michaelyon-online.com/>.
- 1185 60. Comments number 12, 13, 15 & 18 on 'Dispatches: Ghosts of Anbar, Part III of IV'
1186 Michael Yon On-Line Magazine, 30 August 2007, [http://www.michaelyon-online.
1187 com/wp/ghosts-of-anbar-part-iii-of-iv.htm](http://www.michaelyon-online.com/wp/ghosts-of-anbar-part-iii-of-iv.htm).
- 1188 61. In August 2007 Michael Yon's website received 108,946 visitors.
62. See <http://digg.com/> and also <http://reddit.com/>.
63. For example see the 'Have Your Say' page of the BBC News which allows
comments to be ranked either as 'Most Recent' or 'Readers Recommend', meaning
the most widely approved: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/talking_point/default.stm
64. YouTube's policy is that they will review clips flagged by readers as inappropriate or
offensive and judge whether or not to remove them within 24 hours. According to
their guidelines: 'We encourage free speech and defend everyone's right to express
unpopular points of view. But we don't permit hate speech, which is content intended

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to attack or demean a particular gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, ethnic origin, veteran status, color, age, disability or nationality.' Critics claim, however, that *YouTube* exhibits 'Liberal bias' in its judgement of what is and is not 'hate speech'. Specifically, they charge that *YouTube* deems offensive critics of radical Islam while allowing anti-American, anti-Western clips including many featuring attacks on US soldiers to remain. See Sheppard and Sheppard, 'You Tube, Google, and the Liberal Bias Virus', http://www.americanthinker.com/2006/10/youtube_google_and_the_liberal.html.

65. See Elinor Mills, 'The Big Digg Rig', CNET News.com (4 December 2006), http://www.news.com/2100-1025_3-6140293.html
66. Translated excerpts from the message were made available on the website of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI). See, 'Global Islamic Media Front Instructs Islamists to Infiltrate Popular Non-Islamic Forums to Spread Pro-Islamic State Propaganda' MEMRI Special Dispatches Series 1621 (14 June 2007), <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP162107>.
67. Andrew Marr, 'Digital cameras have dispelled the fog of war', *Daily Telegraph* (12 May 2004).
68. On brands see Hutton, *Twenty Five Visions: The Future of Brands*; on political marketing in the US see Schwartz, *The Responsive Chord* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday); and, more recently, in the UK Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution: How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party*.
69. Jason Burke, 'Bin Laden, master of propaganda', *The Observer* (31 October 2004), <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/waronterrorism/story/0,,1340255,00.html>.
70. See *The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other*, Pew Global Attitudes Project, Washington, DC: 22 June 2006.
71. Andrew Marr, 'Digital cameras have dispelled the fog of war', *Daily Telegraph*, 12 May 2004, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/2004/05/12/do1203.xml>.
72. Tony Perry, 'Closer, Stronger, Higher', *LA Times*, 12 June 2007.
73. See, for example, the post 'Time to Move out and Draw Fire – The Battle Over the War Narrative' on Blackfive, one of the most prominent War Blogs: <http://www.blackfive.net/main/2007/08/the-battle-over.html>. The post enjoins readers to 'counter the massive and well funded left wing campaign against Victory' by writing to their elected representatives telling them to 'give General Petraeus, and his counter-insurgency strategy, the time, troops, and resources necessary to succeed in Iraq'. It includes helpful talking points on the costs of defeat in Iraq which would entail:
 - A bloodbath in Iraq, costing hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqi lives and possibly destabilize the entire Middle East region.
 - A failed state in Iraq and a safe haven for Al-Qa'eda to plan future attacks against America and her allies.
 - An emboldened Iran in pursuit of nuclear weapons and a victorious Al-Qa'eda in pursuit of new ways to kill Americans at home and around the world.
74. Waller, *Fighting the 'War of Ideas' Like a Real War*, 53.
75. Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds*.
76. Nye, *Paradox of American Power*, 66–7. I was led to this quote by Neal A. Pollard's chapter 'Globalization's Bastards: Illegitimate Non-State Actors in International Law', in Bunker, *Networks, Terrorism and Global Insurgency*.
77. Tierney and Johnson, *Failing to Win*, 19–20.
78. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*.
79. Moghadam, 'The Salafi-Jihad as a Religious Ideology', 14–16.

80. On marketing segmentation see Frank, Massey, and Wind, *Market Segmentation*; and on political marketing and propaganda see O'Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction*.
81. Pena, 'Under the Umbrella', 22.
82. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 5.

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